

Email Software

Microsoft's Outlook and Outlook Express are the most widely used email programs, but are they the best? James Nixon tests seven leading email clients to find out

The chances are that almost all your correspondence these days is electronic – even important things such as utility bills and banking can be handled without sacrificing any trees. But if email is so important, why do so many people settle for second best? As we'll see, the most widely used email programs on the PC – Microsoft's Outlook and Outlook Express – are lagging behind the competition.

The biggest reason for the popularity of Outlook and Outlook Express is inertia. Express comes installed by default with Windows XP. But since Microsoft ceased any further development on its stripped-down email program in 2003, it's looking decidedly old. Outlook

2003 is better – and if you've paid for a copy of Microsoft Office, it's tempting to use it – but there are various paid-for and free, open-source programs that are better. Some, such as Pegasus mail, are designed with network use in mind, and strip away Outlook's fancy contact management and scheduling functions to concentrate on email. Opera integrates email with a slick web browser. Our favourites, the free Thunderbird mail client and The Bat! from RITLabs, take Outlook's core features and add a wealth of handy search options, templates and extra security measures, together with more sophisticated tools that intelligently learn how to spot spam, the scourge of today's inboxes.

MICROSOFT Outlook 2003



£75 inc VAT

Outlook 2003 is the most widely used email program for business users, due in no small part to the fact that it comes bundled with Microsoft's Office suite. But it's also available as a standalone product for a whopping £75. So what do you get for all that money?

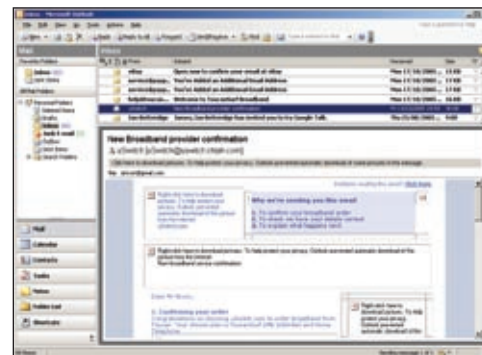
Outlook isn't just an email program. It includes a calendar/planner and an extremely comprehensive contacts manager that enables you to keep names, telephone numbers, email addresses and personal notes on friends and business contacts in one place. This information can also be shared with colleagues who are using Outlook over an Exchange server, which you can't do with Outlook Express 6. Also exclusive to Outlook are a task list with pop-up reminders and a fairly basic Notes function.

Outlook's mail component is straightforward. It allows you to download email to your PC from a variety of mail servers, including Microsoft Exchange, IMAP and POP3. Setting up an account is easy, all the more so because Outlook is so widely used. Webmail services such as Google's Gmail, which allow users to gain access to their webmail via POP3, often provide an automatic configuration tool that fills in the necessary POP3 and SMTP details for you.

Mail is displayed in a tree of folders, with additional panes to show folder contents and preview messages. The former can be customised, allowing you to view all messages from Joe Bloggs that have attachments, for example, group messages by conversation or look only at messages from one mail account.

Unlike in previous versions of Outlook, the message preview pane is disabled by default. This is a useful security measure, as the pane was previously a means by which email worms were spread, running malicious scripts embedded in HTML messages automatically.

Spam filtering is perhaps the biggest change from the previous



▲ Outlook is probably the best-known email program and it has several additional features

version of Outlook. In theory, this should be part of the justification for choosing it over the free Outlook Express. In fact, it's pretty basic. You can choose to receive mail only from known addresses and block specific senders. This blunt approach would have been handy for allowing kids safe, restricted access to email, but Outlook's spam-filtering controls are applied across the board, rather than on an account-by-account basis.

Two further options – Low and High filtering – use Microsoft's SmartScreen technology to mark mail as spam. In part, this works on filter lists, which can be updated at Microsoft's website. It also determines whether or not a message is spam by examining its content. Suspicious messages are converted into plain text and links are disabled, to curb the threat of phishing scams. In practice, the High setting trapped a number of false positives – mass mails that we'd wanted to receive. The Low setting weeded out the most obvious spam, but far less effectively than the 95 per cent or so we'd achieved using McAfee SpamKiller.

Benefits such as diary and task sharing, which Outlook offers over its cut-down sibling, are really of use only to businesses, and they require Microsoft's pricy Exchange server software. Others, such as task lists, reminders and an automatic 'out of office' reply, would be handy for home users, too. But you're paying a hefty premium for the privilege.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Offers more than just email
- ✓ Users can share contact information
- ✗ Spam filtering is basic
- ✗ Very pricy

EMAIL CLIENT Requires Windows XP, 233MHz Pentium processor, 128MB RAM, 150MB disk space
SUPPLIER www.dabs.com
DETAILS www.microsoft.com

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MICROSOFT Outlook Express 6

★★

Free (included with Windows XP)

On first appearances, Outlook Express looks more straightforward than its fully featured sibling. This is because it concentrates on basic communication tools – email and newsgroup reading – and ditches the business-oriented collaboration tools included in the full version of Outlook.

As a result, its main interface looks a lot less cluttered. But while simplicity is often a good thing, once we got started with the program, we realised Outlook Express lacks a lot of Outlook's finesse. The first clue was when it started to receive mail from the Webmail account we'd configured it to work with. Where Outlook sensibly offered the option to download only the headers of each email, allowing you to pick and choose which messages you wanted to download fully,

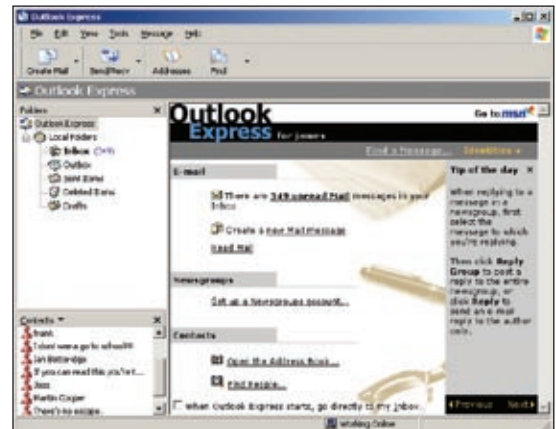
Express started on the mammoth job of downloading our Inbox in full. This may be only a minor inconvenience if you have a broadband connection; the download will simply hog your bandwidth for a while.

If you use a dial-up modem, though, your phone bill could be huge. If you're using POP3 to download mail from a web-based account, you'd be better off visiting the website to delete unwanted messages first. If you're using it to download mail from a POP3 account provided by your ISP, you'll have no way to weed out unwanted mail first.

If this is a huge problem, you can use Outlook Express's message rules to stipulate that it will only download messages that do or don't contain specific words or conform to certain other criteria, but if you have to second-guess who might be mailing you about what, you're not really getting the best out of your email program.

Microsoft's Hotmail service doesn't face the same restriction as it uses an HTTP server, but to get an account that will synchronise with Outlook Express, you'll have to pay £14.99 a year.

Other aspects of Outlook Express make it rather



▲ Its popularity is no doubt due to its inclusion with Windows XP, but is Outlook Express the best email program?

cumbersome to use. We've referred to its system of mail 'Rules', which are designed to manage messages. These enable the program to move, forward, copy or delete messages that fit certain criteria automatically. While these help a little with organisation and privacy, you can't invent your own criteria, and they're no substitute for the more sophisticated sorting and viewing options of Outlook. They're also no substitute for standalone spam-filtering software.

Outlook Express is the most obvious (and free) way to browse and manage your email offline, but it's far from the best.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Free, with no need to download
- ✗ Can't download just email headers
- ✗ No spam-filtering facility

EMAIL CLIENT Requires Windows XP, 233MHz Pentium processor, 128MB RAM
DETAILS www.microsoft.com

MOZILLA Thunderbird 1.5

★★★★★

Free



Just as Mozilla reckoned it could do better than Internet Explorer with its free Firefox web browser program, so it takes on Outlook Express with its Thunderbird email program.

As if to rub it in, Thunderbird bends over backwards to make it easy for you to ditch Microsoft's email software. The first time you run it, an Import Wizard allows you to choose between importing address books and account settings from Outlook or Outlook Express.

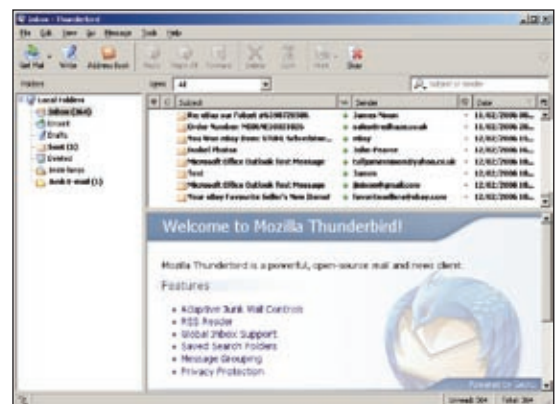
Once the 6MB download is up and running, Thunderbird is almost Outlook Express's doppelganger. Although it dispenses with Outlook's Contacts feature, Thunderbird uses the same basic layout, with mail folders running down the left, a folder contents pane across the top and preview pane below.

A few improvements on Outlook Express are immediately obvious. Among the options appearing in the preview pane as the program starts is a link to open online information on 'Saved Search Folders'. When you use the program's Search feature to look up email in any or all your existing folders, you can save the results in a new virtual

folder. This is a quick and easy way to arrange mail by subject, without having to move it physically from folder to folder. Better still, the contents of this folder will be updated with new messages that fulfil the search criteria.

A feature Mozilla refers to as its Global Inbox makes it easy to organise your mail. Messages within each folder can be sorted according to various attributes, including date, sender, recipient and priority, with different rules applied to each folder.

Unlike Outlook Express, Thunderbird can download only the headers of email messages from POP3 accounts, which is just as well, because its spam-filtering facilities will take a little while to get going. This is because they're based on Bayesian statistical methods. These allow the program to learn which messages you regard as spam, according to the words they contain. You have to train it manually by marking individual messages as they arrive. If, for instance, you tell it that an email containing the word 'Viagra' is spam, then that increases



▲ For an easy transition from Outlook to a more fully featured program, try Mozilla's Thunderbird

the probability that subsequent messages containing the term will be labelled as spam and are treated accordingly. The technique is time-consuming at first, but allows very precise filtering in the long run. Like Outlook, Thunderbird blocks images in email messages that are hosted on remote servers, as this is a common means by which spammers find out if an account is active.

With the only extras being tools to read and manage newsgroups and RSS news feeds, Thunderbird is a bread-and-butter email program, but it works. A small download size, minimal setup and an instantly recognisable interface make this an obvious alternative for Outlook Express users. It might not be quite as flexible as RITLabs' The Bat!, but it's free.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Replacement for Outlook Express
- ✓ Effective spam filtering
- ✗ Mail isn't indexed

EMAIL CLIENT Requires Windows 98 or later, 233MHz Pentium processor, 128MB RAM, 52MB disk space
DETAILS www.mozilla.org/thunderbird

QUALCOMM

Eudora Sponsored Edition

★★★★

Free

Eudora comes in several versions, all of which start from the same installer program. The basic Light mode is a very stripped-down email client. The Paid version costs \$52 (around £30) to register, and includes a suite of spam-fighting tools; BossWatch, a feature that alerts you to prevent accidental replies to particular recipients who require tact, such as managers or clients; and full technical support.

Sponsored mode sits between the two. It lacks BossWatch and includes no spam blocker or technical support, but provides all the other features of Paid mode in return for displaying small adverts in its interface. The ads are unobtrusive, and don't affect connection speed – Eudora proved one of the fastest programs at downloading mail from our POP3 accounts.

The software enables you to import existing accounts directly from Outlook and Outlook Express (along with address books), or supply details manually for each email 'Personality', the quaint term Eudora uses for email accounts. Sadly, our webmail settings didn't transfer as smoothly as we'd have liked. Gmail uses

different ports from the POP3 accounts provided by ISPs, so we had to edit this information manually in Eudora, which is not as straightforward as it could be.

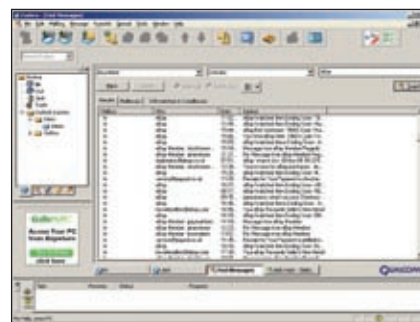
Eudora is extremely quick to download messages. The process can be made even quicker by using a built-in filter that ignores emails on the basis of size, which is a useful feature if you need to grab email using a dial-up connection.

When our mail was imported, a few things jumped out at us. The first was that Eudora provides no immediate indicator of how many messages are in your inbox. The second is that every single message arrived in our inbox. Basic filtering can be achieved by creating mail rules to apply to incoming messages, but creating these is up to you. If you want intelligent spam-busting facilities, you'll have to pay \$52 for the privilege.

On the plus side, Eudora indexes the content of email messages as it goes along, greatly speeding up searches. The search facility also enables you to pinpoint results quickly by filtering them according to criteria such as whether the keyword appears in the header or body, or how the message is labelled. This can be done successively to home in on the email you're

looking for, but searches can't be saved for later use.

When we clicked on a message, we were surprised to discover that by default all graphics were displayed, included those hosted on a remote server. While some people might prefer emails to



▲ Eudora makes light work of email searches, and you can get it for free

look the way their authors intended, this can be a serious privacy problem. Spammers often use requests for remotely hosted images as a way of telling if an email account is active. Options for disabling image downloads are pretty blunt, too; you can choose between on and off only.

Eudora's tools for composing mail are slick, and include some fun features such as MoodWatch, a sort of 'flame mail' grammar and spellchecker that tells you how aggressive your language is. Flexible template options are also available, and switching between the mailbox view, template lists and account information is a simple matter of clicking tabs in a similar manner to Opera.

Eudora is an easy-to-use email client, with particularly user-friendly search facilities. Concerns over security, however, together with a high price if you want to include Bayesian spam filtering, put it out of the running.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Sophisticated search facility
- ✗ No spam filter in free version
- ✗ Some tools are a bit gimmicky
- ✗ Previews not the most secure

EMAIL CLIENT Requires Windows 98 or later
DETAILS www.eudora.com

OPERA

Opera 8.51

★★★★

Free

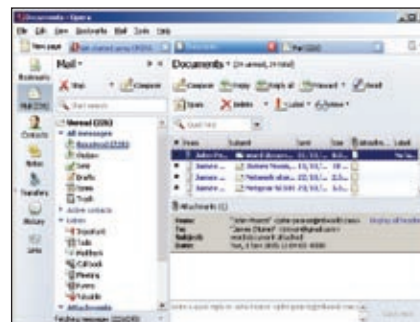
Whether you find the built-in mail client included in Opera's browser as "revolutionary" as its makers suggest will depend on the mail system you're currently using. If you've previously been using Outlook Express, the web page-style format will be quite a departure. If, on the other hand, you've been accessing email on the web using your browser, it's more of the same, only this time the mail that's managed in Opera's slick-looking web interface is all stored on your computer.

Setting up accounts is easy. If you're using a well-known webmail account, Opera automatically provides the server names for POP3 and SMTP servers and selects the correct ports to transmit on. For other hosts, it inserts its best guess and leaves you to edit them as part of the setup wizard. Like Pegasus, Opera took a long time to find and download messages from our POP3 server. Unlike Pegasus, it let us look at mail as soon as it had been downloaded. Also good is a pop-up alert that appears above the System Tray to alert you to new mail.

The complete Opera program, which consists of a fast, slimline browser, newsreader and mail client, is less than 4MB in size, so it's surprising that any one of its components can do as much as it does. Compared to the other dedicated email programs on test, Opera's software looks a bit scant. Its fancy graphical interface stretches to giving you brightly coloured icons with which to label your messages, but the saved search facility doesn't include Thunderbird's handy facility for continually updating the virtual search folder with new matches. In keeping with the web style of its interface, one trick that Opera does have up its sleeve is a range of context menu options when you right-click a message or folder.

Spam filtering in Opera is clunky at first and the default Medium setting resulted in a large

number of spam messages getting through, while the Strong option led to an uncomfortable number of false positives. The filter can be supplemented with rules to include or exclude messages containing specific phrases. The system learns



▲ Opera's slick-looking web page-style format is quite a departure from Outlook Express

using Bayesian filtering, spotting patterns in the messages that are manually included in or excluded from the Spam folder.

While Opera is no match for the technical sophistication of Pegasus or the clean interface offered by Thunderbird, it's incredibly handy to be able to flick from web browsing to email and back within a single application, simply by clicking on the relevant browser tabs.

The security offered by Opera isn't as good as some other programs. For instance, it doesn't support message encryption. However, if the convenience of being able to hop between a browser and an email client really appeals to you, and you were thinking of ditching Internet Explorer anyway, this is a good choice to cope with day-to-day tasks.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Switch between browser and mail
- ✓ Very small download
- ✗ Limited security and no encryption

EMAIL CLIENT Requires Windows 95,
16MB RAM, 9MB disk space
DETAILS www.opera.com

RITLABS

The Bat! 3.65
Home Edition

\$42 (around £24 inc VAT)



The Bat!'s no-frills interface reminded us of Outlook Express, with nothing more than a few extra tabs to suggest its sophisticated options for managing mail. It can handle mail from a variety of servers: POP3, IMAP and, unlike others, Microsoft Exchange.

Once downloaded, messages can be sorted using a number of handy tools in what The Bat!'s makers call the program's Smart Sorting Office. Rules for mail sorting and filtering can be imported from other email clients such as Outlook Express, making it easy to change over. In addition, The Bat! offers the most flexible system of rules here. Not only can you apply different rules to each mail account you use the program to check, but you can do so even on a folder-by-folder basis. These rules can be used to tailor specific automated replies to specific users, or to mail that satisfies other criteria.

To create a rule, you simply press Ctrl-Shift-F while highlighting a message to which the rule will apply. Different filter rules can be applied before

and after mail is read or sent, and a Kill filter can be used in addition to the program's Bayesian spam filtering to delete messages from the server without downloading them. To prevent accidental deletion, messages can be marked as 'parked', preventing them being moved from their current folder. The effect of any filter can be previewed before it's applied.

Mail selected by keyword searches is grouped into virtual folders without being moved from its 'real' location. Previous search results can be viewed by clicking the relevant tab above The Bat!'s preview pane. Other tabs allow you to toggle between groups of folders.

The Bat! also makes it easy to compose messages. The spellchecker works as you type, and a variety of language dictionaries can be downloaded from RITLabs' website. Users can create Quick Templates for email replies, which can be tied to filter rules so that the correct template appears when replying to certain types of message. Macros can be created to insert text or images into messages, and a variety of ready-made plug-ins using The Bat!'s macros are also available to download. These enable users to insert their PC's system information or include

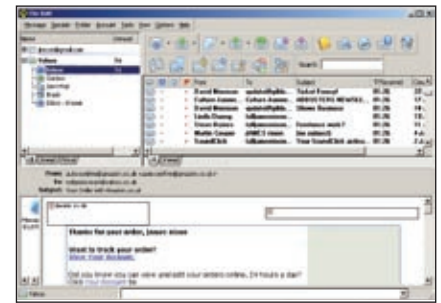
random quips at the end of messages.

Security is top-notch. The usual security measures are in place for previewing messages, with remotely hosted images and scripts disabled by default. A built-in image viewer enables you to

SUMMARY

- ✓ Includes PGP encryption
- ✓ Interface familiar to Outlook users
- ✓ Includes macro facility

EMAIL CLIENT Requires Windows 95 or later
SUPPLIER www.ritlabs.com
DETAILS www.ritlabs.com



▲ A sophisticated and fully featured email program, The Bat! goes to the top of our list

open graphics files without relying on Windows XP's Picture and Fax Viewer, which was recently subjected to a security exploit using .wmf files.

Spam protection consists of a Bayesian filter, which learns as it goes along, from messages that you consign to the Spam folder. The Bat! is the only package here to offer a built-in tool to scramble your correspondence using strong PGP (Pretty Good Privacy) encryption. Encryption can be applied to all or part of a message.

With easy setup and a variety of tools to help you migrate from your existing email program, The Bat! provides comprehensive facilities to help home users manage their email. Strong security tools make it a good choice for businesses and the security-conscious. Unlike Pegasus, it's a program with plenty of scope for techie types to customise it to their needs, but which existing users of Outlook and Outlook Express will find easy to get to grips with. At around £24, it's a snip.

PEGASUS

Pegasus Mail 4.31



Free

Pegasus Mail is fairly small, at 5.77MB. It's designed for network use, and the default installation creates two icons in the Windows Start menu, one for system administrators, labelled Start Pegasus Mail as Admin.

Though not as quick and easy as Thunderbird's Outlook migration wizard, Pegasus's startup questionnaire allows you to get going swiftly. It begins by assuming that you're using the program to download messages from just one mail account. To add more, you'll have to enter the program's rather tortuous manual settings to configure them. When setting the program up to download mail by POP3 from a Gmail account, this proved necessary in any case. Pegasus guessed the ports to be used for both POP3 (sending) and SMTP (receiving), and got them wrong.

When we asked Pegasus to download mail, at first we thought nothing had happened. But after a short pause, Pegasus informed us that it was "identifying unread messages". The process of grabbing our existing POP3 mail from the

server was very slow. If you are using a dial-up modem to download email using Pegasus while away from home, we'd advise configuring Gmail to enable POP3 for new messages. Otherwise, downloading the entire contents of your mailbox, from the oldest message first, will be a lengthy and costly process. Annoyingly, Pegasus also wouldn't allow us to view any of the new messages until it had downloaded the whole lot.

The reason for these glitches is that Pegasus prefers its mail from an IMAP server. This type of server enables mail clients to look at messages without having to download them from the server. For those intending to use Pegasus on a network, its writer David Harris provides a free IMAP server, Mercury/32, on his website.

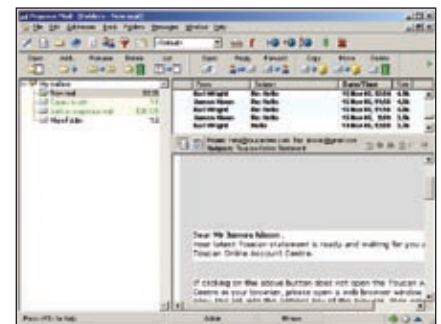
Pegasus contains some handy features for business users. It can, for instance, allow you to create several users or 'identities' on a single PC, with separate mail settings, although these can't be password-protected from each other. It also allows users to create different signatures for their mail, depending on whether they're sending it internally or not.

The program is also zealous when it comes to security. It uses a points-based system for identifying spam rather than the Bayesian method used by Thunderbird. On downloading our existing mailbox contents,

SUMMARY

- ✓ Very secure
- ✓ Supports multiple users
- ✗ Confusing to set up and use

EMAIL CLIENT Requires Windows 95,
5MB RAM, 4MB disk space
DETAILS www.pmail.com



▲ Pegasus has been in operation for a long time, but we didn't find the interface user-friendly

it automatically consigned over half the messages to its 'Junk or suspicious' mail folder. Correcting this involved creating new rules to exclude certain key phrases such as those to do with eBay notifications and so on. Pegasus also claims to be immune from exploits that take advantage of image rendering in other email clients' HTML preview windows.

Pegasus mail has a long history, but compared to the user-friendly interfaces offered by Thunderbird, it's looking long in the tooth. It will run on a remarkably low-spec computer, and its multi-user, multi-account options and security tools will appeal to tech-savvy corporate types. But with many of the program's features hidden behind confusing menus and a general lack of help, home users should steer clear. **CS**